DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 159 RC 020 755

AUTHOR Gour, Noel
TITLE Teacher Perspectives on Distance Education.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 12p.; In: Distance Education and Sustainable Community Development; see RC 020 746.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; Computer Assisted Instruction; Correspondence Study; *Distance Education; *Educational Policy; Equal Education; Foreign Countries; *High Schools; Program Evaluation; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Role; *Small Schools; State Departments of Education; Teacher Associations; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Alberta

ABSTRACT

In 1985, the Department of Education in Alberta (Canada) adopted policy that allows remote or rural high schools to use distance education as a method for increasing curriculum offerings and avoiding the need for school consolidation. In 1987, the Alberta Department of Education implemented the Distance Learning in Small Schools Project to address educational equity of curriculum in rural and small high schools. Participating school districts provided teachers who agreed to complete tutoring and grading work at home for students enrolled in correspondence courses. By 1988, there were 28 schools and approximately 1,000 students participating in the project. In 1988, Distance Learning Project North was implemented in 12 Alberta high schools. This project used computers to teach mathematics and included print modules, videos, and computer software for student evaluation and tracking of student progress. Additionally, on-site teachers assessed student learning needs and provided individualized or small group instruction. A committee composed of teachers participating in the two projects examined the roles of teachers and administrators in program implementation, teacher evaluation procedures, and the effectiveness of computer learning programs. The committee recommended the following policies, which were approved by the Alberta Teachers' Association: distance education should be restricted to the secondary level; school boards should demonstrate to parents that instruction in conventional settings is not feasible prior to adopting a distance education program; and school boards should recognize that distance education imposes unique responsibilities on teachers which must be considered part of their workload. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 400 159

RC020755

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elaine L. Maloney

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

BEST COPY A

Teacher Perspectives on Distance Education

Noel Gour
Alberta Teachers' Association

Introduction

When we talk about the education of students, we generally assume that we are talking about a teacher and a number of students being taught in a classroom. A new mode of teacher and pupil interaction has been evolving in Alberta. The mode or method is called distance education. Why has this method been contemplated in Alberta?

Rural small high schools are wanted by the communities, and yet the demand for excellence and for equality of access has strained the small high school's capability to deliver programs that are equitable to those offered by larger urban high schools. If Alberta's small high schools cannot offer a full Alberta program of studies because of the limited staff and student numbers, then two options are open to school jurisdictions: consolidation and closing smaller schools or a delivery of the program in a different manner. The latter form of program delivery was chosen because the 1985 Secondary Education Policy for Allberta suggested that remote or rural schools, limited in teacher personnel and/or resources, could use distance education as a method to offer a broader choice of courses and thereby alleviate the need to close these schools.

AILABLE

Background

In 1987, the Alberta Department of Education (Alberta Education) began the Distance Learning in Small Schools Project. It was a developmental program by Alberta Education designed to address the issue of equity in education and bring into play the interaction of instructional, economic and political factors associated with high school education in small rural communities. Thirteen schools in ten jurisdictions participated initially.

Each participating jurisdiction was expected to provide a tutor/marker teacher (normally an off-site teacher on a full-time or part-time contract with one jurisdiction, but not assigned to a specific school) who would accept students from all the jurisdictions and do their tutor/marking work at home for specific specialized subjects. The program of studies was supplied by the Alberta Correspondence School.

In 1988, fifteen more schools with fewer than 100 students joined the Project. This increased number of students accessing distance education courses to 1,000.

At the same time that the small schools project was being established, the Alberta Correspondence School wanted to replace mail-in correspondence courses with better designed learning packages because their programs were not meeting the requirements of the revised program of studies for most high school programs. Towards that end, the correspondence school contracted one-hundred teachers to write and revamp twenty courses. The new learning packages reflected not only the revised curriculum but also a delivery of the course content that permitted the use of videotapes, computer software and other media.

In September of 1988, a second project, the Distance Learning Project North, began in twelve schools in the Peace River region. Project North focused on the teaching of the mathematics courses by computer. The math packages included print modules supplemented by video and a computer software package that permitted the tracking of student progress. Tests, assignments and exercises were generated by the computer, at each student's level, from data banks that were stored in the computer. The on-site teachers were expected to assess learning needs and provide individualized or small group instruction.

The Alberta Teachers' Association was supportive of Alberta Education's endeavors. The Association established an ad hoc committee to review the distance education projects and their effects on the students and teachers. A committee composed of teachers participating in one of the projects was asked to recommend policy for the 1990 Annual Representative Assembly of The Alberta Teachers' Association. The committee began its task by reviewing each of the two projects and asking the following questions.

Distance Learning Projects Review Questions

The following areas needed to be evaluated and solutions considered in each of the two Alberta government projects. These areas of study included the tutor/marker teacher, the teaching roles of the tutor/marker, the school's role, the principal and superintendent role, the teacher evaluation procedures to be followed by the jurisdictions, and the Computer Management Learning program and the teacher. Each is reviewed below.

The Tutor/Marker

Tutor/marker teachers were seen as subject specialists who used modern technology such as the FAX machine and the telephone to communicate with their students. As teachers, they used lessons developed by the correspondence school and modified or augmented the materials in order to meet curricular and student needs. They taught their subject to students attending various schools and had to adapt to the demands of many principals with their differing views on education, and to the differing policies among the systems they served. As a consequence the members of the committee explored such areas of concern as:

- Can a networking system be developed between the tutor/marker teachers and all the schools involved?
- What is the effect of isolation on the relationship between teacher and student?
- Should all tutor/marker teachers be assigned to a specific school even though they chose to work at home?

Teaching Roles of Tutor and Marker

All indications pointed to the tutor/marker teacher being equally a tutor and marker. Students could telephone them directly or through an assigned teacher at the school. Teleconferencing was also available for teacher-student verbal interaction. Futhermore, the marking requirements together with the important stage of tutoring were seen to be time consuming. FAXing of student materials needed to be scheduled for the evening in order to permit student tutoring assistance. However, communication with the school's staff appeared to be remote, and teachers at the schools were not always aware of the student's program, progress or lack of progress. As a consequence, the members of the committee explored such areas of concern as:

- What is a reasonable work load for tutor/marker teachers?
- How many different courses could be offered by each tutor/marker teacher?
- Could a formula be devised that reflected course marking load and number of students?
- What should be the role of the school and its teachers towards the student being taught via distance learning tutor/marker teachers?

School's Role

Students needed to be supervised at school even though they received their lesson explanations, lesson corrections and testing from the tutor/marker teacher, a source external to the school. The supervision of these students at the school appeared to be ill- defined. Teachers, it was thought, may not be cognizant of their role in the distance learning project. As a consequence, the role of the school vis-a-vis tutor/marker teachers varied from school to school. The transmission of lessons via FAX machines, for example, was being handled by either students, staff or aides. The tutor/marker teacher could be frustrated by the lack of security at the school. The teachers at the schools may not be aware of these frustrations and may also be frustrated with the difficulties in direct contact with the tutor/marker teachers.

The committee, therefore, explored the following areas of concern:

- What was the school's responsibility for the security of the materials being transmitted?
- How should examinations be sent to the student when the line is not secure from students having direct access?
- What was the role of the teachers in the school to ensure exams were supervised and the answers were forwarded to the tutor/marker teachers?
- What role should the aides or secretaries play in facilitating the transmission of student materials?

Principal and Superintendent Role

The principal and superintendent play a crucial co-ordinating role in distance education. The schools participating in the projects were interdependent. The co-ordination among the schools and between the jurisdictions in the decision-making process was essential. For example, the school calendar varied from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The tutor/marker teachers seemed to be forgotten when the calendar was prepared independently by each jurisdiction. The same can be said of individual school timetable schedules. The committee, therefore, asked:

- Could the jurisdictions coordinate their calendars?
- How flexible could principals be in order to accommodate in- school and distance learning timetabling requirements?

Teacher Evaluation

Pursuant to the Alberta School Act, 1988, all teachers are hired by one employer—one jurisdiction. For purposes of certification and evaluation of teacher competence, the superintendent who hired the tutor/marker teacher assumed that responsibility. However, the evaluation procedures for teachers who work at home may demand some rethinking because distance education teachers may not follow recognized teaching methodologies for purposes of evaluation. The principal's role vis-a-vis these teachers may not include evaluation. Tutor/marker teachers may, for practical purposes, not be

accountable to anyone other than their hiring superintendent. Areas of concern that needed to be explored by the committee were as follows:

- What evaluative criteria could be used by the superintendent?
- Could the superintendent delegate the task of teacher evaluation to one of the principals?
- Would the School Act, 1988, permit such flexibility?

Computer Management Learning (CML) and the Teacher

In Project North, the students enrolled in grades 10, 11 or 12 mathematics participated in the CML program. The students followed the program at an individual pace. Student timetabling flexibility allowed students to enrol in a math course that met their academic needs. The teachers were expected to assist the student individually or in small groups. Teacher intervention in the teaching process was to be held at a minimum. Controversies over the teacher's role erupted at the very beginning of the pilot year. Teachers argued that not all students were good readers. They further argued that students were not all self-motivated when it came to doing their school work. Certain students would benefit more with a traditional form of education whereas others could work well on their own. Members of the committee involved in the CML program were concerned with the following:

- What was the role of the teacher in deciding on the best methodology for student instruction?
- Could a teacher refuse to participate in such a program?
- When should the teacher intervene in the teaching-learning process of the student?
- Was the CML program utilized by the teacher to permit more course offerings per period?
- Was the CML program an equitable form of education for the student?

BEST COPY

Policies on Distance Education

As a result of the review of the projects The Distance Education Committee of the Alberta Teachers' Association recommended long range policies and current directives to the 1990 ANNUAL REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY of The Alberta Teachers' Association. The long range policies adopted by the Assembly are as follows:

Long Range Policies

1) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that distance education be viewed as an instructional mode using various technologies to bridge a geographic gap between teacher and student in a situation wherein the provision of student program cannot be provided in the conventional setting.

It was noted at the Assembly that this policy provided for three essential components in distance education: various technologies, geographic separation of teacher and student, and an inability to provide a program in the conventional setting. It was also noted that all three components had to be present in order to recognize the program as falling within the definition of distance education.

2) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that distance education be restricted to the secondary levels and

3) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that distance education only operate as an additive program.

The committee argued at the Assembly that the distance education program was not designed to provide instruction in the intergrated learning format of the elementary curriculum. It was, rather, a delivery mode for course-based curriculum. It was further suggested that the conventional classroom setting with an on-site teacher should continue as the preferred instructional mode. This should be seen as a right of students and parents which can only be altered by the inability of the jurisdiction to provide instruction through this conventional means. The distance education delivery mode must not replace the conventional mode of instruction.

AVAILABLE

4) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that the teacher must be the essential element in the delivery of instruction to students via any distance education program and

5) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that school boards must demonstrate to parents their inability to provide students with instruction in a conventional setting prior to any adoption of a distance education program.

It was suggested to the Assembly that no technology could replace the teacher's role. Experience in Alberta had demonstrated that the lower the intervention of teachers in distance education programs, the lower the achievement of pupils and the higher their frustration and dropout levels. As a consequence, the best method of instruction should be available to all students. Parents should be consulted if a school jurisdiction wished to use an alternative instructional method.

6) The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates that school boards recognize that the nature of a distance education program imposes its own set of unique responsibilities on teachers which must be recognized in the computation of their workload.

It was noted at the Assembly that distance education teachers were responsible for the delivery of instruction in accordance with a prescribed course of studies to students who may be geographically separated. The geographic gap between teacher and student had to be resolved by using communication technologies such as the FAX machine, teleconferencing and/or one-on-one telephone tutoring. Communication with the administrator and staff of the school(s) and parents also imposed a set of unique responsibilities that did not affect an on-site teacher.

Current Directives

The committee also recommended four current directives for action at the 1990 ANNUAL REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY. The directives for action were as follows:

1) Be it resolved, that all courses offered by a junior/senior high school via the distance education mode of instruction be timetabled in the regular school timetable and supervised by an on-site teacher whose primary function is to facilitate the work of the distance learning student during that specific timetabled period.

BEST CO

At the Assembly members of the committee noted that students needed to be supervised by a teacher in order to ensure that the course materials were completed as scheduled, examinations were received and administered, and student/distance education teacher communications were facilitated. An on-site teacher cannot perform these extra tasks while teaching a class. Specific timetabled periods were preferred.

2) Be it resolved, that the Deparment of Education in its formulation of distance education grants adopt as its goal for equity access to approved curricular programs by all students regardless of location or circumstance.

Members of the Assembly noted that access to an education, regardless of location or circumstance was alluded to in the School Act, 1988. The distance education equity grant attempted to fulfill this goal. However, there was a need for an unequivocal statement that students have the right to access approved curricular programs regardless of location or circumstance.

3) Be it resolved, that insufficient enrolment preventing the provision of a full complement of courses be the sole criterion used to determine access to distance education grants.

It was noted that the purpose of the distance education grant was to enable low enrolment senior high schools to offer a wider range of student courses than possible under the traditional method of instruction. The Minister and the Department of Education had consistently stated that distance education was an additive program to assist all jurisdictions with low senior high school enrolment.

4) Be it resolved, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to develop long-term budgetary commitments for distance education.

Members of the committee noted that there was a need for long- term budgetary planning because jurisdictions will hesitate to commit funds for a program that does not have the Department of Education's long-term support.

Y AVAILABLE

Summary

The two projects in Alberta have evolved into regular programs. The Department of Education has committed resources to upgrade the correspondence courses in support of distance education. With the encouragement of the government, new distance education consortia have been established in Alberta.

There appears to be a demand for distance education learning in Alberta. A few of the concerns relating specifically to teachers are these:

1. off-site tutor/marker teachers may be isolated professionally, administratively and from their students and their communities. How can this isolation be minimized and effective evaluation take place?

2. tutor/marker teachers served a number of schools, communities and administrators all with different expectations and demands. The challenge to teachers is to make such a system workable.

3. the workload of tutor/marker teachers was defined by credit hours, number of subjects, number of students, hours of work to list a few. The challenge to the profession is to define an appropriate workload. That challenge is still ongoing.

4. the on-site supervisor's role must be meshed with the off- site tutor/marker teacher. The challenge for teachers is to define the expectations for each teacher in regards to such matters as security of exams/assignments, individual student assistance, curriculum and materials, and to assess the impact of distance education on the student, school and community.

18A